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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the literature related to learning styles of American Indian and Alaskan Native students. Several studies show that in some tribes, observation, self-testing in private, and then demonstration of a task for approval are essential steps in learning. Indian children often hesitate to participate in large and small-group recitations, but are talkative during interactions with the teacher or student-led group projects. Cherokee children prefer cooperation over competition, and will often hide academic competence to avoid seeming superior. These cultural styles of learning do not match the learning environment of the typical classroom. Although group characteristics may provide a basis for further investigation into individual characteristics, overgeneralizing group tendencies can have the ill effects of stereotypic notion, discriminatory practice, and inappropriate excuses for failure in teaching and learning. Teachers should observe students' preferred ways of learning and plan learning experiences accordingly. New ways of learning can be gradually introduced as children become more comfortable. Teachers also benefit from learning about students' backgrounds and values, and the norms of the community. Teachers must be aware of their own learning style and related teaching style strengths. Assessment tools are available to identify both learning- and teaching-style tendencies. (KS)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools May 1991

American Indian/Alaskan Native Learning Styles: Research and Practice

EDO-RC-91-4

EDUCATORS of American Indian and Alaskan Native students are concerned for a growing number of students who do not find school a meaningful place. These students are becoming "school weary." Studies of learning style among Native students provide some clues about this phenomenon, and this Digest presents a brief review of that literature. It includes a definition, specific examples, cautions about overgeneralizing learning style research, and suggestions for classroom practice.

The information is presented with a view respectful of more than 500 tribal groups. These groups represent an estimated 200 languages, each with its own unique government and social system. Too often, the significance of this variety is overlooked. Many observers fail to recognize that American Indian and Alaskan Native children are individuals who differ dramatically from one another, even within their own communities.

Learning styles: Importance for Native children

Appleton (1983) defined learning style as the method by which one comes to know or understand the world. It is the accustomed pattern used to acquire information, concepts, and skills. The available literature suggests that cultural values and early socialization experiences influence the way American Indian and Alaskan Native children ("Native children" hereafter) understand their world. The examples that follow point out two important aspects of learning style. These are:

(1) learning by observation and

(2) the manner in which competence is demonstrated.

Wax, Wax, and Dumont (1964) gave examples of learning in Oglala Sioux society, where individuals must observe tasks in actual practice before attempting performance. Brewer (1977) also suggested that observation, self-testing in private, and then demonstration of a task for approval were essential steps in learning. Making mistakes in public was not, however, accepted as a way to learn.

Similar evidence regarding observation as a prerequisite to performance was presented about Navajo (Werner & Begishe, 1968; Longstreet, 1978) and Yaqui societies (Appleton, 1983). These cultures respect the ability of a person to learn experientially, without the constant supervision and correction so characteristic of formal instruction. This respect gives individuals the autonomy of knowing when performance of a task is ready for public scrutiny. Such studies show that the way in which children demonstrate their learning in a school setting is related to the way they have acquired knowledge.

Typical classroom learning environments and Native norms

At the same time, many reports suggest that typical classroom learning environments interfere with the way Native children learn. Philips' (1983) now classic study provides a general model for looking at how children from Native groups interact in the classroom. In classrooms attended by Indian children in Warm Springs, Oregon, Philips observed that Indian children hesitated to participate in large- and small-group recitations. On the other hand, they were *more talkative than non-Indian children* when they started interactions with the teacher or worked on student-led group projects.

Philips described a process of acquiring competence that reflected Warm Springs' norms: observation, careful listening, supervised participation, and individualized self-correction or testing. The norms of their culture helped explain why the children were reluctant to speak in front of their classmates. Similar disruption of cultural patterns in classrooms attended by Sioux and Cherokee children had been reported previously by Dumont (1972). The work of such researchers as these suggests that for many Native children, a public display that violates community or group norms may be an uncomfortable experience. Perhaps it is this respect for norms that is responsible for the stereotypic "silent Indian child."

Another circumstance affects the achievement of Indian students, to the frustration of concerned observers. Often, a very able student will hide academic competence to avoid seeming superior. Brown (1980), for example, presented evidence that Cherokee children were *more cooperative* and less competitive than their Anglo counterparts, which seemed to produce lower achievement among the Cherokee children. He explained that in Cherokee society, traditional norms called for maintaining harmonious relations. In the classroom, these norms required students to hold fast to group standards of achievement that all were capable of meeting. Thus, very able students may repress their knowledge and contribute to the lower achievement of the group.

In many Native societies, the humility of the individual is a position to be *respected and preserved*. Advancing oneself above others or taking oneself too seriously violates this key value. If Native children learn best cooperatively, they will experience discomfort and conflicts in classrooms that are *too* competitive or in which the competition is *unfair*.

Cautions about group characteristics

Knowing about group characteristics is important. Such knowledge, however, is not much help when it comes to individual learners. Diversity *within* cultural groups exists and reveals itself as differences among individuals in language use, child rearing, and formation of social networks. The degree to which members of a group absorb customs from the larger society ("macroculture") also determines diversity within the group. For this reason, assuming that a particular *group* will have a particular learning style is not a good idea.

A recent exploratory study demonstrates this point. Swisher and Page (1990) assessed Jicarilla Apache students for field dependence and field independence. These researchers wanted to test the common notion that Native students tend to be field dependent. Their study concluded that within-group differences exist to the point that *no general tendencies* could be determined without further research.

Although group characteristics may provide a basis for further

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investigation into individual characteristics that may constitute a learning style, overgeneralizing group tendencies can have three important ill effects (Swisher, 1990). Such overgeneralizing can contribute to:

- *Stereotypic notions* about the relationship between learning style and cultural group membership.
- *Discriminatory practice* (for example, inappropriate grouping).
- *Inappropriate excuses* for failure in teaching and learning.

Recommendations for teachers

Cox and Ramirez (1981) recommend that teachers use direct observation and classroom experience for instruction that takes account of learning styles. Their field-tested process has six steps:

(1) Assess students' preferred ways of learning and the way(s) in which student behaviors change from situation to situation.

(2) Plan learning experiences that incorporate the students' preferred ways of learning—using teaching methods, incentives, materials, and situations that are planned according to student preferences.

(3) Implement the learning experiences that were planned.

(4) Evaluate the learning experiences in terms of attainment of conceptual or other goals, as well as in terms of observed student behaviors and involvement.

(5) As the year progresses, plan and implement student participation in learning experiences that require behaviors the student has previously avoided. Incorporate only one aspect of the less familiar behaviors at a time—focusing on only the reward, the materials, the situation, or the task requirements. This way, the student can use what is familiar to support the new learning experience.

(6) Continue to provide familiar, comfortable, successful experiences, as well as to gradually introduce the children to learning in new ways.

(Cox & Ramirez, 1981, pp. 64-65)

The following tips address more specific issues. Ask yourself how they apply to your school or classroom. These tips come from many sources, including teachers attending workshops across the nation (see Swisher & Deyhle, 1989, for more details).

- Get to know the norms and values of the community from which the children come.
- Be aware of students' background knowledge and experiences.
- Discuss the students' learning styles with them; help them understand why they do what they do in learning situations.
- Be aware of the pacing of activities within a time framework that may be rigid and inflexible.
- Be aware of how questions are asked; think about the communication style of students.
- Remember, some students do not like to be spotlighted in front of a group.
- Provide time for observation and practice before performance; let students save face, but communicate that it is "okay" to make mistakes.
- Be aware of proximity preferences; find out how close is comfortable.
- Organize the classroom to meet the interactional needs of students; provide activities that encourage both independence and cooperation.
- Provide feedback that is immediate, consistent, and private, if necessary; give praise that is specific.
- Consider the whole child when organizing and planning for learning experiences; consider a whole-language, thematic approach.
- Be flexible and realize that while the goals remain constant, there are alternative ways for students to reach the goals.

Informal student- and teacher-observable behavior checklists have been developed by Ramirez and Castaneda (1974). Other instruments that assess cognitive style, affective style, perceptual modality, and multidimensional mental functioning have been developed and are described in a publication by Cornett (1983).

Teaching style: The other half of learning style

Teachers must first of all know their own learning style and related teaching style strengths. *Teaching style*, after all, is a critical factor in communicating expectations of school *learning styles*. The assessment instruments noted in the previous paragraph are valuable tools for identifying both learning- and teaching-style tendencies.

Above all, teachers must be what Kleinfeld (1979) described as "warm demanders," adults who balance humanistic concerns with high expectations for achievement. They must communicate an attitude of understanding and caring while *at the same time* demanding high performance.

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